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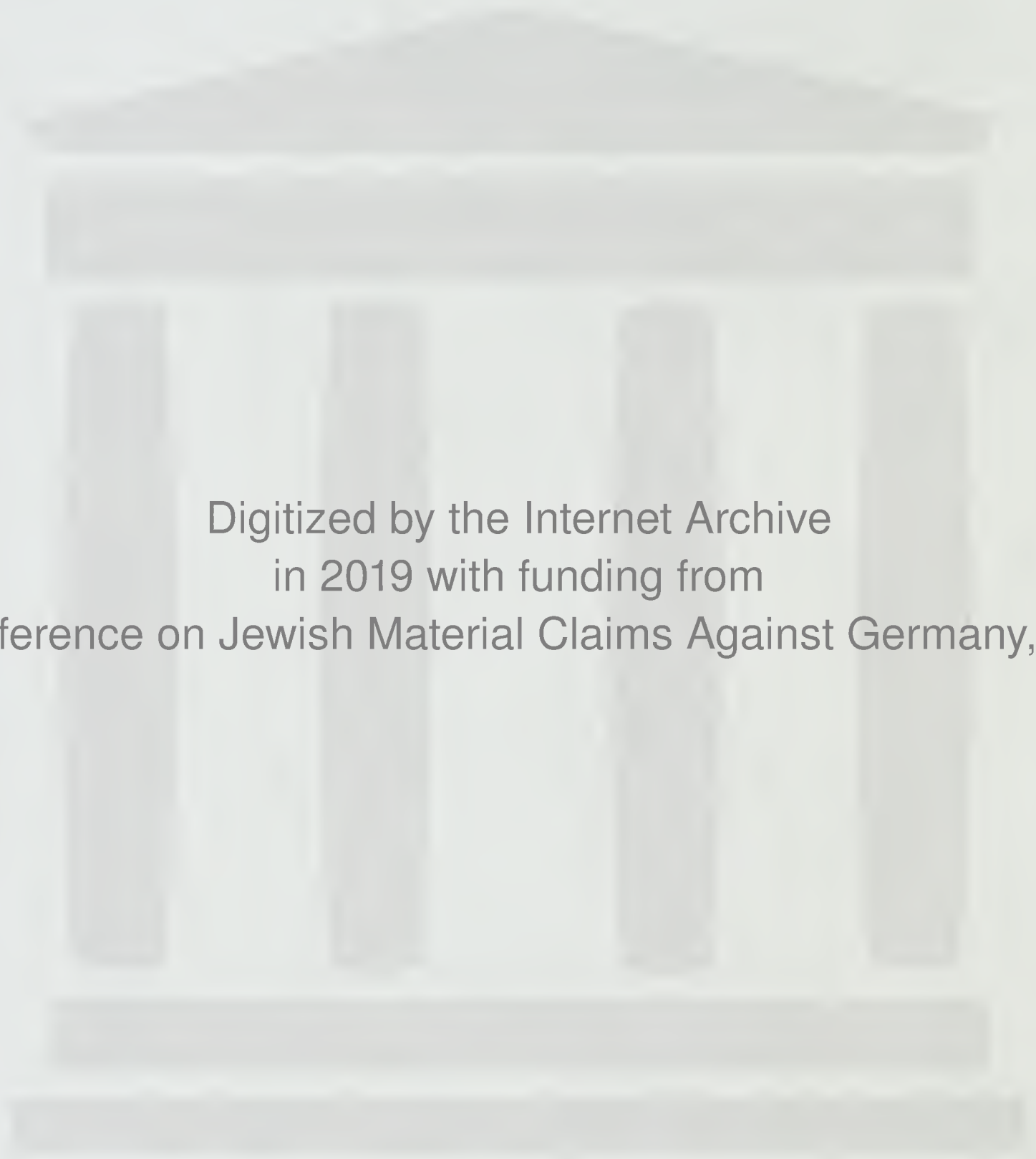


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A LIFE LOST AND FOUND

A Memoir

By

Magda Vass

Memorial Day, 2000

This memoir is dedicated to my son, Andrew, and his wife, Judy. They always are at my side whenever I need them, and, what is more important, they make me feel needed, also to Lori, who instigated my writing it down, and to my other two grandchildren, Stuart and Rachel. I am eighty-three years old, and it is now or never to try to put on paper my very emotionally laden past. It is hard to think back and remember all the horrible events in my life, but I have tried to recollect the pleasant parts of my existence also, not just the earthshakingly terrifying experiences.

My Family Tree

My mother's side: my grandparents, Franz Haberfeld and Fannie Slovak.

They were the sweetest grandparents any kid could wish for. They had a long and happy marriage, each devoted to the other. I loved them. After school, I used to walk to their neat little home, usually with a girlfriend or two. The place was full of atmosphere. There were always cookies and homemade preserves served to us. My friends just loved to go there with me. While we were eating and chatting, we would hear my grandmother raising her voice that my grandfather was cheating in the card game they were playing. He would vehemently object to it, but it was always in a teasing, sweet, and funny manner. They would be discussing all the millions of pengös they owed to each other. They kept score, religiously.

In their younger years, my grandfather owned a small grocery store, with an apartment right behind the store. They had twelve children; some died in their younger years. Two became attorneys in Budapest, two were in business, one owned a necktie factory, and one had a store for all kinds of housecleaning implements. They had four daughters, all married. My mother,

Josephine, was the oldest, and, as a young girl, she learned well how to take care of babies. I have to mention that my grandmother was a beauty as a young woman, as I was told--blondish-brown hair with penetrating sky blue eyes. Her father was the manager of a large farm owned by some Hungarian nobility, and, when they were married, four white horses pulled a fancy carriage to take the bride to the temple. It was the gift of the baron, or count.

After my grandfather died, my grandmother moved in with us. My parents had a big enough home. I couldn't have been happier. She was eighty-two years old when she passed on. When the end seemed to be close, I was the one who stayed up with her all night, and she actually died in my arms. I was about seventeen years old. Just before she died, she reached out with her hands in the front of her and quickly called her dead children's names. I think she visualized them. And pretty soon after, she just collapsed in my arms. It was an unforgettable night for all. I was heartbroken that she was not with us anymore and that she was underground in a cold grave. I couldn't sleep many a night.

My father's side:

I do not know much about my grandparents on my father's side. They lived in the northern part of Hungary. I was told they came to see me when I was a baby. They passed on when I was a little child.

My father and mother had a bakery. In the front of our home was the shop; behind it were the living quarters. There was a long corridor in the front of the rooms--protection from the cold of the winter months and the heat of the summer months.



My Home

The corridor had windows all the way with panels in the front where, from early spring until late fall,

my mother's red geraniums bloomed. My mother loved flowers, and she did not mind working with them, no matter how terribly busy and tired she must have been.



My Father



My Mother

My father--talk about a work ethic--would get up every night exactly at midnight and walk the long road to the bakery even in the freezing-cold winter nights to light the ovens. We had no electric ovens in those days--nobody had. After he was sure that the lighting had worked and the ovens would be hot enough by early dawn, he would walk back to his bed. He would get up again at three o'clock and open the bakery gate to let

the workers in. The bakers then would start making the breads, rolls, pretzels, and other items.

My father would work until about noon, have a large dinner, and then go back to bed and sleep three to four hours. Then he would get dressed and go to a coffeehouse to play cards with his cronies. When my brother George was about fifteen years old, he took on some of my father's chores.

But my mother, what did she do? She made the breakfast and cooked dinner for the family and also some of the help. When my father went to the coffeehouse, she took care of the customers in the shop. She never complained. She lived for her family because that is what her destiny was. She was good, she was smart, she had artistic handwriting, and she attended school until she was about twelve years old, which, in those days, was a rare thing for girls. Her father insisted on it because she was so bright. She spoke a clear German language, read the German poets, and was the proudest mother.

Once a year, my parents went away to a hot bath spa for two weeks, and that was all the rest and recreation they ever had. No, there was one exception. We had a beautiful theater building in our town, and every once in a while, stars came from Budapest to

perform in some famous plays. Then on Sunday afternoons, my mother and I would go to the theater. We both enjoyed it to the fullest.

Also, once a year, my mother got a new dress before the High Holidays. My parents, although they had to watch every penny, still had a seat on the first floor at the temple for my father and another in the balcony for my mother because men and women were separated. It cost money, but supporting the temple and the Jewish grade school was an obligation. Also there was a building for Jewish seniors completely supported by the Jewish community. Every morning, one of the apprentices at my father's bakery delivered rolls and breads to the home free of charge. If that's religion, then they were religious; but they never went to temple, except on the High Holidays, and at the seder, my father was apt to omit a few pages here and there from the Haggadah because who could wait so long for my mother's excellent chicken soup and matzo balls?

My mother was a saint! And the Almighty let her be gassed. My mother was such a refined lady. I don't know how else to describe her except to tell what happened when we arrived in those horrible--built for animals--boxcars at Auschwitz. Two prisoner-garbed tall men opened the locked gates and ordered us all out

while they stood on the top step. The steps were high, and most of the old folks couldn't make it fast enough, so these men just threw them down on the ground. There were piles of bodies already. I had just seen--I was down already--my former professor of Italian and French thrown down. She looked insane. Then came my mother. I think my heart stopped for a second from fear, but then I heard her say, as if she were at a reception of some kind, "Bitte schoen, helfen mir" (meaning, "please help me"), and that man lifted her down in a gentle way and threw the next person, an old man. That episode is unforgettable in my memory. You have to understand that in that boxcar were only children, young women, and old men. There were no young men, of course--they had already been taken away, some to labor camps, some . . . who knew?

I have to talk about my siblings and how good they were to me. My youngest brother, Imre, was eight years old when I was born, and my sister, the oldest, was sixteen years old. When I was about sixteen years old, I was invited to a party, and I really "had nothing to wear." My mother explained to me that she couldn't buy me anything because they were very short with money.

My father had decided during the previous year to play the futures market. Thinking that the price of

flour would go up, he signed up for a certain market value. He had to put up lots of money, which he lost. They could have bought an apartment building with the money he lost; my mother used to show me the building whenever we passed by it. Well, anyhow, there were very good crops that year, prices went down, and my father had to sell his products cheaper than it had cost him. He had to keep the business going at a terrible loss, so money was scarce.

Andor:

There was a new ladies' dress shop downtown, Mrs. Leonard's, and the shop had in the display window a navy blue taffeta dress with a beautiful white organdy collar and a red rose in front. A dream of a dress, I thought--it was just for me. I went home, told my mother about it, and cried. Andor, who was already the manager of a branch office of a large bank, asked why I was crying. I told him about the dress. The next day, when I came home from school, the dress was lying on top of my bed. That was Andor! He did lots of nice things for me. He also had a nice library. Every month he bought a book. I learned a lot from him. He also loved poems and sometimes was asked to recite poems on stage. He was a cultured man.

Dezsö:

After grade school, Dezsö attended the boys' gymnasium and was the pride of his school. After graduation, my father was called into the principal's office. The principal suggested that Dezsö apply to the Hungarian Academy of Science in Budapest because he was the smartest student they had had in a long time. He was also a chess champion--could even play blindfolded and win. He went to Budapest and applied to the academy, but, at that time, there was a so-called *numerus clausus* quota, and, as a Jew, he couldn't get in. He got a job in a large bank, but he was a frustrated man all his life, which ended tragically, most likely on the Russian front.

George:

George was a great help to my father in the bakery business. I remember him well coming from the bakery early in the morning, hours after a night's work, whistling all his favorite songs. According to the American Red Cross, he died in Auschwitz. Of course, we never knew about him there.

Imre:

My youngest brother was a sweetheart, everybody's favorite--witty, smart, and comical. He entertained everybody. Many times after the war, when I learned

Dezső



Imre



George



Andor,

that all my brothers had perished, I used to have such an ache in my heart; it really felt as if a knife was piercing it. Time will never heal the wounds I have but dulls the pain somewhat. Imre gave me a gold bracelet for my sixteenth birthday. I have it still.

My brothers all finished accounting schools and got jobs, except for George, who had to take on the responsibilities in the bakery, since my father was getting old.

Rose:

When my sister graduated from grammar school, she enrolled in junior high. After four years, again my father was called to come to the school. One of her teachers tried to explain to my father how important it would be for her to enter a gymnasium. She was the pride of the school. My father and Rose went to the boys' gymnasium--at that time, there was no advanced schooling for girls. The school's directors wouldn't hear of having a girl enroll. They recommended that my father buy her books and that she study on her own. She did that for a long time and became very well versed in many subjects, but she did not achieve what she could have.

When I was a little child--maybe four or five, before I entered grade school--Rose read me lots of poems. I was a quick learner, and one day, she read me a poem about a poor suffering wife whose husband beat her, pulled her by the hair, and so on. So when we had company, mostly my aunts and some older cousins, I was to recite this particular poem. They all laughed so hard that their eyes were tearing. I really didn't understand the poem, and I was terribly hurt that they all laughed at me. I ran to the bathroom and cried.

My sister, Rose, got married when I was about six years old. Her husband, Jani, was a real nice man, and he was like an older brother to me. They had a little girl called Jutka (Judith), and she was the light of my life. I adored her and still do. When she was about seven or eight years old, she had measles, and, according to Hungarian laws, she had to be quarantined in a hospital. I missed her so. Every single day, I wrote her a poem, and my sister and I took it to the hospital and handed it in at the gate. Jutka buried one of my poems in the cellar with other valuables, like tomato sauce made by my mother and valuable papers. I found my poem after the war. Right now, it is kept in a special treasured place at Bates College in Maine.

My Early Years

I was born in Kaposvar, Hungary, on February 9, 1917, a freezing night. I heard the story of my arrival so many times. There was a snowstorm, the electricity went out, there was no phone, and the doctor's doorbell was out of order. My mother had a hard time with me. She was forty-three years old. I was the sixth child, and my father, in utter desperation, ran as fast as he could to our doctor's home. Since the doorbell didn't ring, he formed a few real hard snowballs and hit the front windows of the doctor's home, breaking them. That definitely woke up the household of Dr. Rethy. He came right away after seeing my father's face red from the icy wind through the open window. They got to my mother's bedside as fast as they could, and, entering the house, they heard me screaming at the top of my lungs. My father had to pay not only for the house call but also for the broken windows.

My sister, Rose, was the oldest. She was sixteen years old when I was born, and I had four beautiful healthy and adoring brothers. Dezsö was the oldest, and then came Andor (or Andrew), George, and Imre. Later on in my teen years, I sometimes resented their

constant watch over me, their chaperoning me, and sometimes I felt their care and devotion to me was too much. How wrong I was!

My father came to my hometown, Kaposvar, as a young man. The city was thriving. It had a hospital, a jail, a dormitory for Lutheran young men who came from the surrounding areas to attend the boys' gymnasium, and a cloister. All the institutions were good prospects for delivering baked goods. My father worked in a bakery, got married, and, in a year's time, opened up his own bakery. By the time Dezső was born, he had built a home. There was also a large backyard, and beyond it was the bakery with its ovens, and beyond that a huge vegetable garden. In the front of the house was the store, where all the delicious bakery goods were sold. It had a nice iron fireplace, but the bedrooms had exquisite-looking tile fireplaces in green and brown. The store had all the necessary racks for displaying fresh baked breads, rolls, crescents, pretzels, and so on. There also was a desk with papers and pencils and two scales with weights.

If I close my eyes, I see it all, and I smell the delicious aroma emanating from the freshly baked crispy, crusted breads. There is nothing like Hungarian breads because the Hungarian soil provided

the best kinds of wheat and rye. Hungary was called the breadbasket of Europe. That was the main reason that all through history Hungary was invaded by Turks, Russians, Germans, and Austrians, who created the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

In those days, many housewives prepared their own bread dough, and they brought the loaves to our bakery to be baked in our large ovens. I maybe was as old as you are now, Rachel--seven or eight--when I had the very important job of placing a stamp-sized number on top of each unbaked loaf and writing down the name of the person who brought in the loaf and the number I placed on it so that a couple of hours later, when the people would come in to fetch the baked breads, there could be no mistake which bread belonged to whom. Of course, I did all this during vacation time or in the early morning hours. Later on, I also had the real pleasure of weighing the baked breads and charging for each according to its weight.

When I was about ten years old, I had the responsibility of getting up at six o'clock in the morning and counting the rolls and breads into baskets (I counted as my father taught me--two rolls in one hand, three in the other). The apprentices then carried the baskets on their backs to deliver on their

bikes to grocery stores, homes, hospitals, and so on. This job and the responsibility made me very proud. Of course, I had to write everything down, and the delivery boys had to bring the receipts and/or money for all that was delivered. Maybe that was the basis for my accounting abilities.

All my brothers had some chores to take care of. Mother would be busy in the kitchen preparing breakfast for all. My sister would be having her beauty sleep. She was always my father's favorite. She was beautiful and extremely smart, even precocious. I was very devoted to her as a child. She and my eldest brother, Dezső, were the rulers of the brood, and many times they played all kinds of tricks on their younger brothers.

As long as I have reported my siblings' scholastic achievements, I think I should also write about my own. I attended the gymnasium for girls after finishing grade school. (When my sister was of that age, there was not an advanced school for girls yet.) It was expensive, supported entirely by parents. All professors except one had Ph.D.s. I loved the school. I excelled in Latin, math, and especially in literature. I was also tutoring girls in math and languages. I was recommended by my professors.



When I was young

I had one fantastic professor, Dr. Biczó. He was well described in my niece's book, Seed of Sarah. Dr. Biczó, before graduation, insisted that I talk to my parents to persuade them to let me go to Budapest to the university to become a literature professor. I told him my parents would never let me go. He said he had connections and that he was sure that I would be accepted. A few days later, he said I should tell my parents that he would come to see them the following day at 4:00 P.M. I remember I couldn't sleep all night. I was so afraid of how my father would behave. He had a short temper. I was afraid that he would tell him to mind his own business. I couldn't have been more wrong. They were sitting at the dining-room table, talking very quietly, mostly Dr. Biczó. I was watching them in secret from the next room. The upper part of the door had glass panels. After a while, they stood up, and my father--I will never forget it--put his hand on Dr. Biczó's shoulder, and I heard him thanking him. From the expressions on their faces, I knew it was a lost cause for me.

Besides, there was a nice-looking young man, Sandy, who showed special interest in me. He and his parents owned vineyards and raised cattle that they butchered and sold. They were well-to-do people, but

Sandy didn't finish his education past junior high school. He was put to work. I was not interested in him at all. He was very sweet. He sent me flowers all the time and even gave presents to my brothers, like imported cigarettes. He took me to the theater and to dances.

By that time, my parents were getting quite old, and to them Sandy represented security for my lifetime. My father especially, but my mother too, would have been so happy if I had said yes.

One night, Sandy invited me to his parents' home for dinner. The maid brought in a large tureen with soup and noodles, and while his mother ladled out the soup, she looked at me and asked me if I knew how to make noodles. Noodles were always homemade, but I never liked to go to the kitchen much, so I said in a very cold voice, "No, I do not know how to make noodles." When I got home, I cried all night. I knew I couldn't marry into this family--I didn't care how rich they were. The following evening, Sandy went to my sister's home. He stayed so long that they had him for supper.

My parents called my brother, Dezső, who lived in Budapest, to come and talk to me. He refused. He said I was old enough to make up my own mind about what I

wanted to do. My brother Andor really understood me more than anybody, and he insisted that nobody had the right to tell me what to do. Imre, whom I absolutely adored, made fun of everything and made me laugh through my tears.

I know for sure if I had married Sandy, I would have had babies and wouldn't be here today.

My Marriage

When I married my first husband, Ferenc Rosenberger--I called him Feri--he had a beautiful store on Main Street. He sold women's lingerie, men's shirts, children's clothing, hosiery for everybody, gloves, neckties, and so on. It was a beautiful and successful business. He had also finished the gymnasium, which meant a lot to me.

He and his mother together owned a two-story building; stores were downstairs, and upstairs were two apartments. His mother, a widow, lived in one of them, and we lived in the other.

A few years later, after we were married, the winds of war reached Hungary. We all were scared but not too much. We didn't believe anything could happen to us, but then my brothers and Feri and Jani, my sister's husband, were all called into labor camps. My brother Andor was demoted to a small town not too far from Kaposvar, and his position as bank manager in our town was lost to him. We realized the sudden changes in our lives.

Feri could come home for weekends every once in a while, and I became pregnant. We had a Jewish gynecologist in town, and he became very busy

performing abortions on young Jewish wives. I was one of these wives. It was a terrible experience for me, since I wanted that baby so much, but it was impossible not to face reality and to bring a baby into that kind of world. Feri wanted me to go ahead with it. So did my whole family. I still think about it many times.

It is hard to believe how my life could turn around and so much for the worst. When I attended the gymnasium, I was a top student respected by everybody. At Hungarian festivals, I was asked to recite patriotic poems. I was also a true Hungarian in my heart, and all of a sudden, I was a despised Jew.

The Ghetto

In early spring of 1944, we were placed in a ghetto. My parents' house was in the ghetto but not mine. The ghetto was close to our beautiful temple because many Jews lived around there. The bakery, of course, was closed. My father was already over eighty years old, and George was in labor camp. We had many people live in my parents' house. They were placed there by the authorities because my parents had a large enough home.



My Mother; My Sister, Rose; and My Father

One day, my father was sitting in his favorite chair, and I was sitting by him under an apricot tree, when Mr. Ulrich showed up. He came directly to my father and, in a very disrespectful way, said, "I came to look over the bakery and the house because we will get it as soon as you will leave."

My father, who was never afraid of anybody, practically jumped up from his chair and ordered him to leave. He said, "As long as I am here, don't you dare to come here. Don't you dare to go into the house and scare my wife. Get out. Get out."

I was frozen stiff from fear that Mr. Ulrich, a man in his forties, would hit my father and that there would be a fistfight, but nothing happened. He left. Many years later, when I went back for a visit to Hungary, I heard that Mr. Ulrich was hit by lightning and died on the spot. If there is an eternal life, it was my father who struck him down.

A few days after Mr. Ulrich's visit, my father passed on. He died in his own bed, and I am thankful for that.

My father died at the end of June 1944. We were allowed to go to the cemetery. Our mother wanted to wait another day for the burial, hoping that at least one son would arrive to say Kaddish. And lo and

behold, Imre walked into the cemetery. He had escaped from his camp and was hiding in the lavatory on the train all the time, and that's how he also returned to the labor camp. We were all hugging and crying. Just him being there gave us hope for the future. We loved him so! There was a short service conducted by an assistant rabbi. Our rabbi had died some years before.

Besides us four women and my brother, there were two women at graveside, not Jewish. One was an old poor soul who lived not far from my parents' house in a little room at the end of a yard in an old building. She came every morning to our bakery, and she received a roll or some bread free of charge for years. The other old lady was Ms. Hotto, who was our laundress for many years. She loved to work for my mother, and I, as a little girl, liked her too. They kneeled at the grave and prayed.

Imre, before he left, had a good talk with Jutka and me. He told us scary stories he had heard about rapes and wanted to make sure that we would be very careful.

By that time, we were sure that we would be transported somewhere. Jutka and I climbed up to the attic carrying coats and suits belonging to male members of our family. We built a brick wall there and

hid all those clothes behind it. We thought we did a pretty good job. When I returned to Hungary in October of 1945, there was nothing there but a bunch of loose bricks. Whoever found our wall must have laughed at our handiwork. We had to take to the city hall everything valuable; if the local German authorities found anything of worth in our homes, we would be punished severely. The rumor went around that beatings did occur, so we took to the city hall my parents' beautiful sterling silver set, every piece engraved with their monogram, JVL. Also we had to turn in our radios. I remember how hard Feri worked building a frame for our large new radio to make sure that it would be in good condition when we returned.

We did hide in our mother's flower beds some of the silver spoons and ladles, my mother's gold chain with a watch, my bracelet, my engagement ring, and a couple of pins. In the cellar, Jutka and I hid my mother's tomato sauce, rendered goose fat, and some valuable papers. Somehow we all hoped we would return and everything would be waiting for us. Such naivete!

Food was getting scarce, though there was a small grocery store right at the edge of the ghetto, and we were allowed to go there every morning for bread and other items. As I mentioned before, in the back of my

parents' house was a large garden. Of course, the couple who tended it couldn't come into the ghetto. I went down there every day to hoe the potatoes and lettuce and pick whatever I could for our meals. The last meal my mother prepared in the ghetto was freshly picked wax beans cooked to a perfect delicate flavor and sweetened with my mother's apricot jam. The taste of that meal stayed with us for a long time.

Leaving the Ghetto

I think it was July 1, 1944, when we were ordered to pack a small bundle because we were going to leave the ghetto. We sewed a few pieces of jewelry into the shoulder pads of our coats, put some jewelry in toothpaste, and sewed some money into hems of dresses. We just looked back at that family home, my mother's eyes full with tears, and walked to the temple yard.

All members of the ghetto were gathered there. Rough-looking, rude women examined us to see if we were hiding anything valuable on our bodies. They even reached into our vaginas. It was awful. Jutka was just nineteen years old! I do not remember the exact date we were taken close to the railway station and placed into horse stalls. One Jewish family had become quite rich exporting horses, and I think they built those stalls.

We were all in a daze. How did all this happen? From our homes to the ghetto to horse stalls? Am I a married woman? well-to-do? Am I the former Magda Vago, Mrs. Rosenberger, respected by everybody and for many reasons? I remember I was constantly thinking of Feri, of my brothers. Will we meet them?

I do not remember anymore how many days we spent in the horse stalls. Maybe just a couple of days, and then the boxcars came for transportation. Where to? I was glad that my father didn't have to be there. From the horse stalls, we were ordered to get into the boxcars, which were also built for animals. We were surrounded by yelling Hungarian and German soldiers. We got into the boxcars. They locked the gates with heavy iron bars. The stalls were crowded with us. There was not enough room to sit, hardly enough air even to breathe. We were mostly women, but there were also some adorable little children, who just knew that even their mothers couldn't help them. They were so well behaved; they somehow understood the impossibility of their situation. There were also some old, sick men.

There was one pail to take care of eliminating our bodily wastes. One had to stoop low to do it. My mother--as all of us--always waited to the last minute, and I had to stand in front of her to help give her some privacy. We brought along some food, but nobody was hungry, though we were very thirsty. Before long, the odor was terrible; the pail was filled to the rim. A German soldier who had been walking from car to car on the train opened the little window, emptied the

pail, and closed the window. It was good that for a minute we got some fresh air. The traveling took maybe three to four days--an eternity--and we didn't have any idea where we were heading, but we were sure (?) anything would be better after we get out of the boxcar, which certainly was not built for humans. Wrong again.

Auschwitz

It was late at night when we felt the train slowing down. I looked out through that small windowpane and saw a railroad station and a sign: Auschwitz. I told everybody we were at Auschwitz. Where was Auschwitz? Nobody knew. Finally the train came to a halt. (I mentioned earlier our arrival and my astonishingly brave and self-assured mother.)

After disembarking, we were told to go in lines. I joined my mother, who was right in front of us--me and Rose and Jutka--with Rose's mother-in-law, Szida, and her daughter. My mother insisted that I should stay with Rose and Jutka. I said no, I wanted to stay with her. She raised her voice to me and insisted that I should stay with them.

"I'll be okay," she said, "with Szida, and please do not argue with me." Did she have a heavenly intuition?

Describing the arrival in Auschwitz would take a Dostoyevsky to give the full picture of the smell of burning flesh, the smoke flowing toward the starlit sky. What could it be? And I knew that second that I might not see my mother again. I looked at Jutka, and I told her what I thought all that burning flesh smell

might be, and she looked at me with wondering eyes and didn't say anything.

German and/or Polish women guards with dogs surrounded us and told us that we all were going to take showers. They told us to take off all our clothes and that we would find everything after we came out of the showers. They were all lies. I never saw my mother again, and we didn't find any of our clothes. (We were each given a prisoner's garb, a loose striped dress with a big red cross painted on the back.) Before we went into the showers, they shaved us completely; not a strand of hair was left on our bodies. In the showers, we kept our mouths wide open to try to swallow some water, as we hadn't had any since we left Kaposvar. When we came out of the showers, we could hardly recognize each other. We all looked like young men. It was scary like everything else--the darkness, the air, the smell, the completely shaven heads.

We were taken to a building, Birkenau, with hardly any roof on it. We tried to find a little space to lie down on the floor to stretch our limbs, stiff from the boxcar experience. But there were hundreds of us and not enough space. We had to rest, but we couldn't lie down. Bodies pressed bodies. Sometimes we got up and,

holding each other's hands, tried to sleep standing up. It was also hard to recognize each other with our shaven heads. It was the most horrible night. Could it be worse than nights and days in the wagon? Bodies on bodies, no sleep, no room, after all the sleepless nights of travel. We were very thirsty and started to get hungry too. And then it sneaked into my mind again: Who am I? Am I Magda Vago Rosenberger?

The night, which was cold, turned into day, the sun burning our shaven heads. There was no cloud in the sky. We prayed for rain, and when it came in little drops, we opened our mouths to try to give our bodies a few drops of water.

Water was very scarce in Auschwitz. Once a day, a carriage came carrying a large drum filled with water, but if you had no cup, you couldn't get any. All those hundreds and hundreds of bald women running to the carriage, holding little tin cups, or running around to try to find one on the ground. When I found one, another thirsty soul gave me a push. I dropped the cup, and she picked it up and ran as fast as she could. I remember I just stood there gazing and wasn't even angry. Maybe she was even thirstier than I was? Jutka found a cup and got a little water, and we all had a few sips. Once a day we were given a small bowl of

so-called soup. It must have been made of tree leaves and tree branches. That's how it looked and tasted, but it was at least liquid. I couldn't imagine what the soup was made of, since Auschwitz was the most desolate place--we couldn't see any trees, or grass, or any life in nature. From this particular diet, everybody suffered from diarrhea, and we were always running to the open-air latrines; men were always around cleaning the latrines.

And then I noticed Dr. Magyar. Dr. Magyar was also from Kaposvar. He was a dentist--a well-known oral surgeon. People came to him for dental surgery from all over Hungary, even from Budapest.

When I was I believe seventeen years old, I had the most horrible pain on the left side of my face. Three doctors and three different dentists couldn't figure out what was wrong with me. Our family doctor thought that I had arthritis in the face and only some pills could help me.

One night I had such horrible pain that my brother Andor called for a fiakker, a horse-drawn carriage, and called Dr. Magyar to ask if he would please look at me. The doctor waited for us in his office. It was in the middle of the night. He drilled a hole in the infected tooth, and I remember seeing all the pus flowing out.

The pain stopped. After that night, I had to go back to him several times for root canal treatment, which no other doctor or dentist in Kaposvar ever had heard of. Of course, Dr. Magyar saved my life; so did my brother, who just had to do something for me.

Dr. Magyar was a nice man, always asking me about my studies. He took a liking to me. He had a gentile wife and a ten- or eleven-year-old son. He used to go every year with his son to European boy scout jamborees, and there he became very friendly with another doctor from London, England. When Hitler's oratory started to threaten Hungary, the doctor from London wrote to Dr. Magyar to come to England with his family. He said he would take care of them. Dr. Magyar's wife was not willing to go, and he wouldn't go without her.

Dr. Magyar called my brother (he banked with him) to come see him; he wanted to talk to him. When my brother came home, he told us what was on Dr. Magyar's mind. He wanted me to go with his son to England. By that time I think the boy was about thirteen years old. He would give me jewelry to take with me. His friend would take care of his son and me. Dr. Magyar guaranteed to send me to a university to further my education. Most of all he wanted to get his son and me

out of Hungary, away from the Fascists and who knows what other tragedies. He thought very highly of me, and he wanted me to go with his son. My brother Andor thought it was the best thing for me. I thought so too. But my parents wouldn't hear of it, and they even wondered why Andor liked the idea.

Oh well. Now I was in Auschwitz, seeing that wonderful man cleaning the latrines. He died there; so did his son. Many years later when I went back to Kaposvar, I heard that his wife had survived and left Kaposvar. Nobody knew anything about her anymore.

Well, my life could have taken quite a different turn, but, miracle of miracles, I survived. I have you three wonderful grandchildren, and thanks to the Almighty I have my son--a good son. So let us go back to life(?) in Auschwitz.

We were in Auschwitz I think about four weeks. We couldn't have survived much longer. Jutka was nineteen years old, and I was twenty-seven, and we both seriously considered suicide. But how? We didn't even have a rope! There also was an epidemic in the neighboring building, and there Jutka's best friends died.

The most horrible, agonizing memory I have still is a large open truck carrying adorable little children crying, "Anyukam, Anyukam," Mommy in Hungarian, and the mothers being held back by women guards with their vicious barking dogs, the mothers crying their children's names as the truck drove off. How can I ever erase that picture from my mind? I still see those little children's faces and hear their mothers' cries.

I have had nightmares many times, waking up screaming. I have visualized my mother in the gas chamber, choking; how long did she suffer? Some years ago, I read someplace it may have taken fifteen minutes to die, but hopefully she may have gotten a heart attack sooner.

Auschwitz: misery, devastation, burning sun, hunger, thirst, the smell of burning flesh, hopelessness, shame--yes, the feeling of shame for the way we were, for the way we looked. We were bald with sores on the tops of our heads; some of us had menstrual blood running down our thighs. Hell on earth! We were desperately trying to find a reason to live and hoping and praying to die.

Then one day an order came to take off those hateful uniforms, to stand in line, all naked. Of course, by that time, we knew whatever order was given, we had better obey. We were surrounded by Polish and German women and men and their barking dogs. All of a sudden, a man appeared dressed in a fancy uniform. I keenly remember the white gloves he wore. He carried a gun. Later we were informed that he was the infamous Dr. Mengele. We went in front of him all naked. One by one, he looked us over and then directed us to the right or left. My sister was almost forty-three years old and already showing some effects of Auschwitz. Dr. Mengele ordered her to go to the left. Then came Jutka, who was still a beauty. He ordered her to go to the right.

Jutka started to scream, "No. I go with my mother."

One of those women with guard dogs and a German soldier started to holler, "Come back. We will shoot you!" But Jutka just kept on running and got lost in the crowd.

Then I came, and before Dr. Mengele could even order me to the right, I started to scream while running. "She is my mother too!" I could practically feel the shot piercing my back, but nothing happened.

We found my sister among hundreds of women. Kneeling in the dirt, she hugged us and said something I will never forget: "Oh, you both are here. This is the happiest day of my life." We were, all three of us, in some kind of ecstasy that all through those horrible experiences, we were still together. All three of us were alive!

I think it was the following day that we were taken to the railroad station. All those who were ordered to go to the right perished in copper mines or in chemical works factories. They were all young, able-bodied women just like Jutka and I were.

Hess. Lichtenau

We arrived in Hess. Lichtenau on a nice sunny afternoon. We must have been a sight to look at. Women and children were standing in front of their homes, looking at us, making fun of us, and laughing at us. All of us bald, dirty, in those horrible prison uniforms. Oh, my goodness! They are laughing at us!

Again I had that horrible feeling: Who am I? Where am I? Look at those nice homes; they all had flower boxes on the outside windows, mostly geraniums. Geraniums? Oh, my mother. I wanted to talk to her, or maybe pray to her. It was strange to be in a normal-looking town with geraniums in flower boxes outside their windows. After Auschwitz!

We were walking a long while, and then we arrived at a camp. There were barracks with roofs--what an improvement! There were thin army blankets on the cots. We all just about fell on the cots. We were completely exhausted, hungry, and thirsty too. We received some kind of thin soup and a slice of bread! The bread especially felt so good. We laid down again, and we hoped for the best.

At about four or five o'clock the following morning--the sky was still dark with lots of brilliant

stars above--we were called to stay in line for zehlappel, roll call. That was a much hated regular very early morning activity, a roll call that was, of course, not necessary. Where could we have gone? It took a long time, and after that, we had to walk a long way to the railroad station. It was early morning when we arrived in Furstenhagen. We walked from the railroad station to a mountain. We continued inside, into the stomach of the earth, where we found a huge ammunitions factory.

Some women were put in the chemicals section, and when they appeared in the evening for the walk and ride back to camp, they were completely yellow. The three of us were put in a huge place, where I was put at a large drill press. Another woman had to put her foot on a pedal that activated the top of the machine to come down to engrave numbers on shells. My job was to lift the very heavy shells and place them in a vise on the inside of the press.

I was there only two or three weeks when one day a German soldier came by, kicked the woman working with me in the back screaming, "Mach schnell!" Work faster. The woman quickly put her foot on the pedal as I was just placing the shell inside the machine. Luckily I noticed. You couldn't help hearing the soldier, so I

pulled my arm out as fast as I could. The shell fell down, but I saved my arm. My little finger on my left hand was hanging down like on a thread, and the ring finger was damaged too. Some soldiers took me to a doctor, who cut off my little finger and bandaged the other one also.

It was a horrible experience, also very painful. But who knows? I think this frightening episode helped all three of us survive. By the way, my sister's and Jutka's jobs were to place the engraved shells on a gurney. My sister started to get very tired and weak, and Jutka did some of her job too. The doctor told me to come back in a week, or two, I don't remember. His wife, a nurse, was nice, and once she gave me an apple. This was a real treat for us. We hadn't seen fruit since we left Kaposvar. We were not as hungry as we were in Auschwitz. Here we were laborers, so they had to sustain us.

A few weeks after my accident, they put me in the officers' dining room to clean the tables. That I could do, though my left hand was still bandaged and hurting terribly.

I cleaned their dishes and put the leftovers into my bosom. I found a rope to hold it all in. By that time, my sister was so weak that she could hardly hold

her head up. I used to wait for her and Jutka coming back from work, and I could see her head bobbing up and down. Well, I had good meals waiting for them. At that time also during the day, they put me in a little room to peel potatoes. I saved all the potato skins and hid them in my uniform. We lived on them too. The potato peels definitely contributed to our survival.

Many, many years later, when my grandson--you, Stuart--was born, my niece Jutka from Maine flew to Chicago just to see you and me, the happy and proud grandmother. So your dad took us to a very nice restaurant for dinner.

While looking over the menu, he said, "Mom, they have roasted potato skins for an appetizer. It's real good. You should have some."

Jutka and I looked at each other, tears flowing on our faces. It really was an exceptional moment for us. My son soon realized what had happened; he remembered the story of the potato skins. Nobody could have even guessed what potato skins meant to us. I better return to Hess. Lichtenau.

One day the order came again: "Everybody out and stand in line." The commandant appeared and took a good look at all of us. Then he selected a few to go out of line.

My sister, the forever optimist, whispered to Jutka and me, "We should get out of the line too. You have a bandaged hand. We all could go to another camp where the work will be easier." So all three of us stepped out.

The commandant looked at us and, turning to Jutka, asked what she was doing there in that group. She said that we would like to go to another place where the work is easier, since I, her aunt, had a bandaged hand. He looked at all of us and, cussing, ordered us back into the line. He saved our lives. All of those selected were shipped to Auschwitz to be gassed.

Meanwhile, one of the German officers took a liking to me and decided I should be her personal maid. I cleaned her room and brought her food from the kitchen. That was a dream job. Sometimes she gave me food; many times I had the opportunity to steal food from the kitchen. By that time, I also had become very thin, and my even looser dress could hide any kind of food, even bread. It was a job for survival for all three of us.

I had real trouble with my bladder. It was winter already. We were very cold, especially at zehlappel time. I remember distinctly one night I urinated thirty times. I would go outside to do my job, and by

the time I got back and stretched out on my cot, I would have to go again. Those were scary times.

There was a troop of French prisoners, male, walking at the edge of our camp every morning, and sometimes someone would drop a cigarette. I would pick it up regularly and give it to one of our German supervisors. Obersharffuehrer, Herr Obersharffuehrer, I called him. (Herr means "sir.") He was very grateful. One day I told him that my sister's birthday was the following day, and a little warm soup from the kitchen would be a real present to her. Next day, when my sister and Jutka returned from the munitions factory and we all sat down for our miserable portion of a dinner of soup and bread, in he walked with a large bowl of hot soup and a pear. A real PEAR. We all admired the pear. My sister was in awe. She wanted Jutka and me to share the soup and the fruit, but we didn't touch it. That was her forty-third birthday.

Later on we heard from the French that Roosevelt was dying, or even dead. That night, when I was going out for my regular visits to the toilet, I passed the officers' club, and I heard a big celebration going on. They were having a drunken brawl. I heard strange laughter and hollering, lots of noise, and singing too. Were they celebrating Roosevelt's death?

I was filled with so much hatred by that time that I lost my personality completely. I had never hated anybody before. I knew I was a much better person than those drunken bums, and right there in that cool, starry German night, I remembered a quote from Emerson: "The only thing important in life is the starry sky above me and the law of morality in me." Of course, I remembered it in Hungarian, so this translation is not quite as poetic.

Unfortunately, it wasn't every day that I was able to enlarge my breast size with all kinds of leftovers from the kitchen or from the officers' tables. There were days when we were so hungry we didn't even have the energy to talk to one another. It was on one of those days when I went out to relieve my bladder that I noticed the commandant's dog sleeping peacefully by a dish filled with the most delectable-looking beef stew, with potatoes and gravy. Oh, my goodness! I had to snatch that dish. If the dog would wake up and bark, I'd be shot, but who cared? I couldn't resist--the food looked delicious. I practically crawled on the ground, got close to the dish, grabbed it, and ran as fast as I could. I got it, and the dog didn't even move. The three of us ate it all down to the very last drop of gravy, but now I had to return the dish. I had

to be very careful. I crawled back. Nothing happened, and I ran back to the barrack. I felt very good; we all did.

We didn't have enough nourishment. My sister started to get very weak. Besides the work in the factory, she and Jutka had a long walk each day to and from the railroad station. These were life-threatening times. Some died or went insane, but the three of us just had to think of Auschwitz, and life looked more promising. We just knew that the war would be over soon. It was not over soon enough, of course. We heard the French whispering that the Germans were in a lot of trouble, and the end for them was coming, and that we should be very careful at that time. How? What could we do? I still worked for that officer, and I tried to collect some food. That's all I could do.

Meanwhile, they didn't get in materials for the factory, so one of the horrible supervisors ordered us to dig ditches. It was terribly hard work, since the ground was full of stones. We really couldn't do it well enough, and she kept hollering at us. She had a long, ugly face, and we called her the horse.

A New Camp

One day the Germans were running around like crazed animals in all directions. We guessed maybe the war was over, but we had no idea what was awaiting us. What were their plans for us? We had to leave camp. I do not remember how many days we walked, two or three. Finally, we arrived at a very large camp--hungry, dirty, and scared out of our wits. The German officer, who was my boss, found me. She wanted to make sure that I'd be there to do her chores, so she ordered me to a barrack with other kitchen helpers. I told her that I wanted to stay with my sister, but she wouldn't hear of it. The following day, I was put in the kitchen to work, and it definitely was a blessing. We all guessed that we would be marching again, but nobody knew anything for sure. But I knew I had to be prepared. I stole breads, potatoes--anything I could hide. There was so much uncertainty around us. From one day to the next, we didn't know what was going to happen. But thanks to the Almighty, one night the Americans came.

When I heard the first bombs, I ran out to join my sister and Jutka in their barrack. I was afraid that by morning I might not find them. It never occurred to

me that anything could happen to us. After all, we were on the American side! Or we just did not care if the bombs hit us as long as the Americans would finish this outrageous, despicable German war. Well, the firebombs came, one after another and another. We were shivering, fearful that the bombs would hit us. It was a very mixed sensation. We were so happy that the Americans had come with their bombs, but we still hoped the bombs wouldn't hit us, and they didn't. After a while, everything was silent. I looked out. The sky seemed to be red from the fires. Everything was ablaze except where we were. The barrack where I was supposed to be was completely burned down. We walked over. On the cot where I would have been resting, a woman was lying facedown, burned to death. An iron fireplace had fallen on top of her. It was another miracle in my life that I escaped from the barrack where everybody was burned to death.

As I mentioned before, every day when I had the chance, I stole breads and potatoes. I do not remember where and how we hid all those treasures, but we did. I had six loaves of bread and sixty potatoes. We felt rich and somewhat secure. *I never will forget those numbers.*

One day after the bombing, the Germans again started to run in all directions. We were ordered again to stand in line. The rumor went around that we would be going on a long walk, and those who couldn't keep up would be shot on the spot. Now we knew that my sister would not be able to go on a regimented walk, so Jutka and I decided that we wouldn't go either. We would hide. The ambulance was empty, so we went in there. We lay down on the cots and covered ourselves with a very thin army blanket. We were so thin that we didn't show below the blanket.

My German officer boss was looking for me. She still wanted me to be her maid. She came into the ambulance and called for me: "Magda, Magda, where are you? Come, I need you." All three of us were absolutely motionless. We didn't even breathe, and she left.

Hassag Lager

After a while, all noise ceased. I got up and looked out. There was not a soul in sight. Now we were alone. Now what? We decided to go out and start to walk. Which way? Where? First, we tore off some bread and shared a little potato. We didn't eat much, since we didn't know how long the food would have to sustain us. *I never felt richer in my whole life than that time, with those six loaves of bread and those sixty potatoes.*

We were walking for a while when a German soldier with a big gun on his shoulder appeared from nowhere. He asked us where we were coming from and where we were going. We told him we didn't know. I was sure he was going to shoot us on the spot. He took a good long look at us and left. What a relief! I think we cried. I wished one of those French prisoners would show up, but nobody was around, not a soul. Where did all the Germans disappear to?

We kept on going. Sometimes we sat down on the ground and had a bite of bread and another bit of potato. We passed some fields and plucked some turnips planted for animal feed. They were very hard to bite into, but we tried. It gave us a feeling of having

eaten a vegetable; it also gave us some liquid. We hadn't had any water for days, and by that time, we had hardly any bread left and maybe one potato. I remember we were very scared of what would happen to us. We were wandering--I think for several days. Finally, one late afternoon, we spotted a large building. We had no idea what it was, but we had to try and go there.

The building called Hassag was a Polish women's prison camp, and the capo was a Polish countess. We asked to see her. She looked us over and said, "I cannot help you. We are still bothered by the Germans all the time, and all I need is some Jewish women! There is a cellar. You can go there, but I do not know that you are here. You better not come out, and as far as food goes, we don't have enough for ourselves either."

We begged her for food but to no avail. We found the cellar and went there. It was a frighteningly dark, musty-smelling place with some vermin running around. A little window high up on one wall gave us a little light.

During the night, Jutka and I sneaked out and looked for food, any food. It is strange that I don't remember if we found any.

Arrival of the Americans

We were in the cellar for quite a few days when one morning we heard noises, cars being driven and some honking. I lifted Jutka up to the window to look out; she was very, very light. She cried out, "I think these are Americans!" We left the cellar right away and went outside. Yes, they were Americans! They looked at us like they had seen ghosts.

"Hungry?" "Thirsty?" they asked. "Yes, yes," we answered. They gave us food, Hershey bars and some other food. One soldier opened up a large can of pineapple juice. I remember seeing Dole on it. I didn't know what it meant. He gave me a large can of pineapple juice, and I drank the whole thing. Nothing in my whole life tasted soooo delicious. Jutka and my sister, of course, received all kinds of food also.

That night we became terribly sick. We hadn't eaten anything for days, and all that food and drink made us very sick. We had even eaten canned meat, I remember. Well, at that time, we didn't have enough common sense to think of the consequences. We were starved, and we had a feast. We were told by the Americans that they would return in a couple of days.

When we felt better, we went around the camp and

looked over the surrounding area. There were no Germans in sight. We found an abandoned building and went inside. There was nobody there. It must have been some kind of office. We found some pencils. Oh, my God! "Look, a pencil!" We took some. We saw no papers. In the corner was a curio cabinet. It was empty except for a beautiful ceramic bird on a shelf. The bird had lovely green hues and was sitting on a tree branch. I took it. I still have it. I remember I called to Jutka, "Look, there is a bird. We are as free as the bird." I would like you, Lori, to have that bird and to treasure it.

A few days later, as promised, the Americans returned. We were told that we were close to Leipzig, that large German city famous for its culture. They took us away to a place where they already had some Greek women settled in an old hotel. After the cellar living, it looked terrific. The Greek women were downstairs, and we got a room upstairs with a bathroom. We could drink water even from cupping our hands; it was a pleasure. We could get washed up, and there was a bed and a cot. We were told that the Americans delivered food every day. The delivery truck came every day, but the Greek women were not willing to share. The most they were willing to give us was one

slice of bread and one slice of salami for each of us. Well, we were again very hungry.

There was a window in the room. I looked out and could see a lot of people--all going in one direction, all going to the American headquarters. I said, "Let's go too."

We wanted to go back to Hungary to see our family. We hoped they were all OK. We also wanted to try to get some food. So we left our loft and went where everybody else was going. There was a long line. Almost everybody else looked like us--disheveled, hungry, pale, and anxious. People were speaking in many languages. It was like a tower of Babel.

We stayed in line for hours. Finally, we got to the door. We walked inside, and there were many doors. We stopped in front of one, where two nice-looking American officers stared at us, at our hungry faces, and asked who we were and why we had come to the headquarters.

The language they spoke was German, and Jutka was our spokesperson. They were very nice, and they directed us to the right office. We didn't accomplish much. They had no idea when we would be able to get transportation to Hungary, but they gave us directions for further inquiries. So we went back to our so-

called home disappointed. On our way, an American soldier asked Jutka if she would like to have his bike.

"Sure," Jutka said, "but we cannot give you anything for it." He laughed and said that he didn't want anything, that he was leaving the following day to go back to the States."

"You can have the bike," he told Jutka. This was wonderful because Jutka went all over on the bike trying to find some other accommodations, and she found a nice enough place where there were some other survivors. There was a nice room available. Good. We moved in.

A few days later, while Jutka was cruising on her bike, she heard some honking. She looked and saw a jeep with who else but the two nice Americans we had met at the American headquarters! We invited them into our little but neat room. We really enjoyed visiting with them. I could see that the one called Ike couldn't take his eyes off Jutka, who was very thin and very pale but whose beauty still showed through.

Ike was truly an exceptional young man. Afterwards he and his friend, Fred, came every day. They brought us fruit and other food, toothpaste and toothbrushes, soap, and whatever we needed. Ike was a very warmhearted, intelligent, and cultured young man.



Rose and Jani,



Jutka and Ike

In a way he also saved my life. One day I suddenly became very ill with a terrible headache. It was not a regular headache. It was aching, blinding pain, and I couldn't even get up. I just laid there on the cot. Ike went and got me an American doctor. After talking to me and asking questions, the doctor found out that I hadn't yet started menstruating. My sister and Jutka already had. He left and returned shortly with some medicine. By the next day, I started to flow, and my pain was gone. Later on I found out how dangerous my sickness was. I could have died within days.

Going "Home"

After a while, our lives became more relaxed, and we all hoped that we would hear good news about our families. I was very anxious to get back to Hungary. Ike and Fred had all kinds of papers to travel all through Europe, and they drove me to Prague, Czechoslovakia. We spent the night at a Czech family's home, and in the morning they put me on a train going to Budapest.

I can't describe the excitement, the exuberance I felt. I was going home! I would see my family! Ike gave me some money to have while I traveled.

As I got closer to Budapest, I had mixed feelings, and my exuberance vanished. There were some men on the train who made me feel very uncomfortable. For a while, I thought maybe I was just imagining things.

The wheels of the train were humming Ka-pos-var, Feri, Andor, Imre, in rhythmical excitement. Hope, happiness will be mine soon, soon. A song my mother used to hum, a folk song, came into my head: "You little bird high up in the sky, flying homeward." I was like that bird, flying home, to Kaposvar, where I was born and married--where I had lived all my life.

To my home, to my family. I was trying to push the wheels of the train to go faster, faster. I could feel Feri's arms around me hugging me tight, my brothers' happy faces looking at me seeing me alive.

Finally, we arrived at the Budapest railway station. I had to disembark and take a later train to Kaposvar. Since I had a little time, I decided to look up some relatives, hoping to find them and to find out about my family. I got to their apartment building. I could hardly stand straight, my heart was beating so fast. I remember I was trembling and hardly had enough strength to push the doorbell. Little Tommy, about six years old, opened the door. I told him I was from Kaposvar and my name and that I was anxious to know about my family. He knew right away what I wanted to know, and he said, "The family from Kaposvar. Oh, ja, they are all dead." Just like that.

Then his mother appeared, and when she looked at me, she just hugged me. We fell into each other's arms and cried. After a little visit, I took the streetcar back to the railway station to go to Kaposvar. Maybe I would find some friends. Maybe my home would still be intact. I desperately needed to go to the cemetery to my father's grave and also to the graves of my

grandparents. I was heartbroken. I felt all alone in the world, and I really didn't know how to face the world without all those who were so dear to me. It also kept creeping into my mind, why did I survive? Why? There were a few Hungarian men on the train who started to look at me and whisper. I knew the way they paid attention to me that they knew that I was another one who returned. Again I felt very uncomfortable.

The train stopped. The familiar sign, Kaposvar, was facing me. The last time I was there was in the horse stalls. I got off the train and walked on that very familiar street with the beautiful theater building--the building I used to go to on Sunday afternoons with my mother. There was a large fence in front of the building, and, oh my God, in large letters, in white paint was written DEATH TO THE JEWS! I couldn't believe my eyes. How? Why? After millions were killed. I was trembling, and I was scared. I could hardly walk. But I kept on going to my parents' home and mine.

On the way, I met our old laundress, Mrs. Hotto. (Remember? She was at the cemetery when my father was buried.) I cried. She hugged me, and the tears were flowing from her eyes as well as from mine. "Mrs. Hotto, that sign on the fence, why?" She said, "I tell

you. That's all envy. There are only a handful of young men who returned, and they all are in business already. They opened up their stores. A lawyer started his office. There are only two or maybe three women who survived." Mrs. Leonard's boutique where I got the navy blue taffeta dress was open. A hat store was already reopened. Feri's and my store was still boarded up. Some of those hateful characters wanted the few remaining Jews out.

"Mrs. Hotto, what will I do?" I said. She was so sorry for me and told me about one woman who survived who had an apartment close to my parents' home. She also told me that one of my best girlfriends and her husband both survived.

I had to find a place to stay. I first went to my home. I rang the doorbell, and a young man opened the door. I told him who I was. He closed the door. I knocked on the door again. He opened it a little and said I couldn't come in--it was their home.

I could see a little of my beautiful living-room furniture and the kitchen, with my painted apple green cabinets. I could hardly keep from screaming. I went to Mrs. Kraus, whose niece was a real good friend of mine. She was very nice. Her niece had died. Both of us cried and cried. She made space in her little

apartment for me. She said I could sleep there. She gave me some food. Food was very scarce and terribly expensive. In a couple of days, my money would be gone.

The day after I arrived, I walked to my parents' home. I knocked on the door, but Mrs. Ulrich wouldn't let me in. There was the flower bed where Jutka and I had dug into the earth the night before we were deported. We had hidden some valuables: a few spoons and ladles from my parents' sterling silver set; my bracelet; and my mother's gold chain with a watch, which my father had given her for some anniversary.

I started to dig with some spoon Mrs. Kraus gave me for that purpose. All of a sudden, I was surrounded by three or four gendarmes who were worse than police and asked me what I was doing there. I stood up and told them that whatever I found would be mine. I remember I was scared, but not enough to show them. They said that Mrs. Ulrich had called them and told them that I was "digging for treasure." That really made me angry!

I didn't know what to do, and that minute who would appear on the scene but my old friend Sandy? He already had a store of household and office cleaning supplies close by, and he had seen me pass by. He also

had seen the gendarmes, and he had an idea I'd be in trouble. He told me and them that he would be back in a few minutes with a lawyer. My friend Marta's husband, Laci, was the lawyer and a very good friend of my brother.

Sandy came running back with the lawyer, and the gendarmes left. Sandy had lost his wife, who was pregnant. He was extremely nice to me. He invited me to dinner and came with me to the cemetery. I went every day, trying to make some sense out of it all.

After that encounter with the gendarmes, I returned to my parents' house and went straight to the cellar. The cellar had an outside door. I went in and found my mother's tomato sauce bottles, the rendered goose fat containers, some pictures, some papers, and one of my poems to Jutka. It was October. There were some cool days, and I wondered how I would fare during the winter. I went to Mrs. Leonard's boutique and asked if I could work for her and get a coat for the winter. She said she had no work but if I found any of my mother's preserves, we could make a deal. That was good news, so with Sandy's help, I took all the tomato sauces and the pails of rendered goose fat to her, and she gave me a beautiful gray wool winter coat. It was a good deal for both of us. I wore that coat for

years. I soon learned that my beloved Feri had died in Budapest during a typhus epidemic after liberation from the labor camps. I have no idea where he is buried.

The road to and from the cemetery was the main street. One day while I was returning from the cemetery, I met a former friend of mine, Irma, not Jewish, pushing a baby buggy. I was happy to see her. She was part of my life in the good old days. She looked at me in a strange way and said, "This baby doesn't have a father anymore," and she looked away and left without another word. I couldn't believe what I had heard, but there it was. She sounded like she blamed me for her husband's death.

And there was another encounter with a former friend on the same street, another day, coming from the cemetery. Her name was Elisabeth. She had been a very smart student and had become a medical doctor. We, I thought, were also good friends. Her parents had a home close to my sister's, and many times, when I went to visit my sister and they would see me, they would call me in for a visit with them. They knew that while Elisabeth was the top student, I was the next best student. When I met Elisabeth on the street, I was really glad to see her. I said, "Hi, Elisabeth. I am so glad to see you!" She looked at me and turned her

head away and left. To this day, I can't believe how a smart, intelligent woman could believe that I, as a Jew, could have caused that terrible war.

How could I express my desolation and heartache? I felt that that bird who was anxious to fly home had lost her wings. Returning home to the mood in Hungary was a culmination of all the tragedies I had already experienced! It seemed that it was the Jews who caused the war, not Hitler.

Walking on Main Street one day, I heard a car honking. There were not too many cars on the streets at that time, so I looked, and lo and behold, Ike and Fred were in a jeep in my hometown. I could hardly believe my eyes! They had come with the hope of finding my sister's husband, Jutka's father, and taking him back with them to Germany, where Jutka and her mother were set up in a nice home.

I told them everything about how alone I was in Kaposvar, and I took them to the home of an old friend, a doctor. The doctor set them up for the night in his office. And then I took them to Marta's apartment. They were very happy to meet them, Jutka's future husband especially, and wanted to have them for dinner,

but they only had potatoes. The always practical Fred asked if there was a farm nearby. Marta said there was and told them which direction to go. In less than an hour, Fred appeared with two chickens.

"How did you get those?" we asked in complete admiration.

"Oh, nothing to it," he said. "I just shot them in a farmer's yard. Then I knocked on the farmer's door and gave them coffee, chocolate, and cigarettes. Everybody was happy." We had a real good Hungarian chicken paprika for dinner. But my heart was really aching for my loving husband and for my four beautiful brothers.

While we were visiting at Marta's house, Laci called me aside and read to me from his diary, which he had kept while hiding for more than a year. He was at the same labor camp as Imre and had tried very hard to persuade Imre to escape with him. Imre had said no. He was afraid they would be shot in no time. Then one day such an insidious crime was committed by their guards that Laci definitely decided to escape during the night. Still Imre wouldn't go. There was a Jewish war hero from the first world war who was blinded. He lived in Kaposvar and was a well-known lawyer. His son, who was at the labor camp, was chased up a tree in

the dead of winter, and the guards hosed him until he froze to death. Laci left and was alive; Imre stayed and was later killed.

Meanwhile, Sandy was asking me to marry him several times a day. I wasn't ready at that time to marry anybody. There were other men looking for a bride, but I promised Sandy if I would get married, he definitely would be my first choice. I showed Ike and Fred my parents' home, my home, and Jutka's home. Also I found some pictures and a few belongings in the Jewish Home for the Aged. Of course, there were no aged Jewish people anymore, but a table was set up for items found that belonged to those who were taken away. I found Jani's picture in a Hungarian officer's uniform, looking proud. He was smiling as he always did. Ike was happy to see a picture of Jutka's father.

Ike and Fred asked me what I would like to do. I had no idea about my chances of survival in Kaposvar, but I really didn't feel like getting married. I was trying to find a salesman of ours to whom Feri had given boxes and suitcases full of merchandise to keep in the hope we would survive and then could reopen our business. I looked for him, but I couldn't find him. Most likely, he went to another city and opened up a business with our inventory. Well, Ike said he thought

the best thing for me would be to join my sister and Jutka, and he would make sure that we all go to the UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. I thought so too. The next day I said good-bye to the few friends who had survived including Sandy. Sandy was very nice. He kissed me good-bye and wished me well.

Getting to America

My leaving Hungary was quite a peril-laden adventure. It was well known the Russians didn't let anybody leave the country. Whenever we got close to a border, Ike and Fred covered me with army blankets, so I almost suffocated. I couldn't move; there was not a sound out of me. They would get out of the jeep, give cigarettes and Hershey bars to the Russian guards, and have some conversation and jokes with them. The guards would then let them go on. They had all the necessary papers. The guards sometimes looked into the back seat of the jeep, where I was stooping on the floor, but they couldn't see me. So it went at each border crossing. It was wonderful to get out from under the blankets and breathe again.

Finally, we were back in Germany. I had the frightening responsibility to tell my sister and Jutka about Jani and about the rest of the family. It was tough for all of us.

Jutka and Ike were married in Nuremberg by a judge on December 24, 1945. Ike gave a can of meat to the judge, and the judge was very happy. After a while, Ike left for the States, and Jutka left on the war brides' transportation. Before Ike left, he arranged

for us to stay at a place in Munich where displaced persons were quartered. He also arranged for some of his buddies to look after us. He gave each of us twenty dollars. He wanted us to have money on us in case something would happen and he wouldn't be at Ellis Island waiting for us. But he assured us that he would be waiting for us.

In Munich, we had to go through all kinds of physical examinations and get X-rays. My sister was called in an office and told she couldn't go to the States because they found something wrong with her lungs. We both became hysterical. I said then I wouldn't go either. I couldn't leave her there. But we both believed that there must have been a mistake. I begged them to let her take the test again. We went from office to office, and they finally agreed. Thanks to the Almighty, it had been a mistake. There was nothing wrong with her lungs.

One morning while we were standing in the "chow line," a man approached me, saying that I looked just like his cousin. His name was Mike. He was very nice. We had breakfast together after that every day, and we also had long walks. He had lost his wife in Auschwitz; she was pregnant. He was liberated in Mauthausen. He had a brother living in Springfield,

Illinois. He had left Munich a couple of weeks before I did. We exchanged addresses and promised to write to each other.

Before we left Munich, the rumor went around that anybody found to be involved in the black market would not be allowed to leave for the States. Well, we both got scared. What if they found the forty dollars on us. We had a long discussion about it, and finally we decided to get rid of our forty dollars. We really had no idea how much it was worth. We went to the ladies' room and flushed it down the toilet.

We arrived at Ellis Island in July 1946 on the ship Marine Perch. Lots of American soldiers were coming back on this boat. Some of them, black soldiers, told me some frightening stories about the U.S. and the Ku Klux Klan. Of course, I had never heard of them before. I really didn't believe that soldier. To me, the U.S. was the country of equality, freedom, and promise for a better life. Well, to me, it was all that.

It was an unforgettable sight and feeling to stare at the Statue of Liberty. I had read about it, and I knew of Emma Lazarus's poem, but to be really facing it was almost like another miracle in my life.

A New Beginning

Ike was waiting for us, of course. We drove back with him to Maine, asking about Jutka and being very anxious to see her. We hugged and kissed at our arrival and cried a little. After all we went through, here was that beautiful woman, a mother-to-be. They had a very small apartment. I stayed with them for about a week, pestering Ike to get me a job, any job. I had learned five languages back in Hungary but had never learned English. He got me a job at a lawyer's home in Brookline, Massachusetts. He put me on a train to Boston. The lawyer's home was huge, and an older couple, two younger couples, and two children and a baby lived there because apartments were hard to find. I received twenty-five dollars a week, and I had a roof over my head and food too.

The work was very hard, cleaning up after all these people and doing all the kitchen chores. When I had a little time, I had to take care of the children. They were about five and seven years old and very undisciplined, and I had a hard time with them. To improve my English, every night for several months I read The Boston Globe before going to bed. I discovered the help wanted ads, and on my Thursday free

day, I went to a couple's home to ask for the job they had advertised. There were just the two of them, so I changed jobs. The work was much easier, but after a while I felt terribly lonely, not seeing anybody else but this very old couple. I enrolled in an evening class for refugees to learn English, and there I met some people like me. I saved some of that same weekly wage, but I had to buy shoes and underwear. I didn't have any of those. My feet started to ache in the heavy army boots a soldier had given me back in Germany.

Through the HIAS (Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society), I met a very nice lady, and she got me a job in an elegant ladies' wear store on Beacon Street in Boston. On the outside, it looked like a beautiful home; on the inside, there were two floors of sale racks, and the third floor was the alterations department. I got a job in the alterations department, though, in all honesty, I didn't know much about alterations. I had never seen an electric sewing machine, but there were three or four other ladies working there, and they were very nice about helping me. I had to rent a little room nearby with kitchen privileges. I had to pay rent and buy food. My wages didn't go too far, and on Thursday nights, I always went to bed hungry.

Meanwhile, I had started to date a fellow refugee I had met in my English class. He was a Polish Jew who had a nice job at his uncle's zipper and button factory in Newton, Massachusetts. At the same time, I kept up my correspondence with Mike. He was employed at a large bindery working for the state of Illinois. The trouble was that he couldn't get into the printers and bookbinders union. All the other workers had voted against him because with him working there, they would have no overtime wages. The owner of the shop came to Mike several times, promising that, with his connections, he would be able to get him into the union. But if after working for a certain length of time, he was not a member, he wouldn't be able to work at all. Mike kept asking me to move to Springfield. He said two could live as cheaply as one and that there were plenty of dress shops where I could get a job.



Me and Mike

A New Marriage

At that time, my sister had a job too, in Boston, and we shared a one-room apartment. On her way to work, she passed a railway station. I asked her to stop by and get me a ticket to Springfield. She did but got me a return ticket to make sure I'd return. Well, I stayed, and in a couple of weeks--on September 7, 1947--Mike and I were married. I got a job in a ladies' ready-to-wear store. We rented a nice little room with kitchen privileges from a very sweet and refined widow. Mike's boss came to our home several times, and he practically begged Mike to be patient and wait for his union membership. But Mike already had some other plans forming in his head. Before I had even gotten to Springfield, he had gone with his brother and his wife to Rockford to visit some relatives. There he looked up printers' addresses in the telephone book and looked almost all of them up.

Rockford was a rich and busy city, the second largest in Illinois, with many factories employing thousands of people. All the printers were enthusiastic for him to open up a bindery and finishing business because there was none in Rockford. All their binding jobs had to be sent to Milwaukee and/or

Chicago. Mike had already at that time decided that sooner or later he would be in business in Rockford. Well, all that trouble with the union was a blessing in disguise. Mike told me about Rockford--about the printers who wanted him there and the possibilities that city offered.

Of course, he would need machinery and other smaller equipment, and we sure didn't have enough money for that. Well, Mike's brother and a doctor friend gave us some money, and I think my sister gave us some of her savings too. We had saved a little together, and I had a little savings from before our marriage.

Building a Business

We left Springfield in 1948 and moved to Rockford. We found an empty storefront that used to be a beauty shop. There was a little kitchen in the back and a small room that was good enough for a bedroom. There was a shower in the basement.

Mike went and bought a used paper cutter and some other small equipment. Then he let all the printers know we were set up for business. The mayor of the city was also a printer, and through him somehow the newspaper heard about us. Holocaust survivor in bookbinding business! Reporters came to our shop, took pictures, and wrote some very nice articles about both of us. That was the best advertising anybody could wish for, and it was free.

In no time, we got quite busy. Printers, advertising agencies, churches, and industry people were asking estimates on catalog bindings. Individuals were bringing in old Bibles for rebinding. And then came the springtime, when we bound all the yearbooks for all the schools in surrounding areas. Of course, for all this work, we had to buy a large folding machine, a gluing machine, and some big tables to work on. The busier we got, the more we were in need of

money. There was always need for some more equipment, both large and small. We still had meat only once a week, and I walked far to the A&P to shop because the carrots were a penny cheaper. Our main task also was to repay everybody we owed as soon as possible.

We had a sign out: VASS BOOKBINDERY. One day, an old couple stopped by. They were from New York. He had invented a sealing machine, and seeing the sign on the window, he came in to try to sell us his machine. We told him it would be wonderful, but we had no money. I invited them for supper and gave them the Hungarian goulash they asked for. Then they came up with a proposition. They liked us and would send us the machine, and we would pay them 50 percent every time we had a job. They trusted us completely. We signed a paper to that effect, and they left. In a couple of weeks, we received the machine. I called all the printers and advertising agencies and told them about this new machine we had. Well, the jobs soon poured in.

One day we received a huge truckload from Kable Printing Company in Mt. Morris, Illinois. It contained advertising material that had to be sealed; otherwise, the post office wouldn't deliver it. Our shop was not big enough, and the floor shook frighteningly whenever

Mike used the huge paper cutter. It was impossible to have all that truckload of paper placed on the floor.

Across the street was a potato chip factory. When our "fame" started to reach people, the owner of the factory came over to welcome us into the neighborhood. Since we had no idea what to do with all that paper and because it was a big job that we really didn't want to lose, Mike went over to the potato chip factory and asked to see the boss. He met him and told him what our problem was and asked if the paper could be stored there until we finished the job one load at a time. He said, "Look, Mr. Vass. There is no problem. You don't have to do the job one load at a time. I'll send over a truck to bring over the machine and all the materials, and you can do the whole job here. No problem."

I can't describe what that meant to us. He wouldn't even accept any money. Even after we sent the 50 percent to that couple in New York, we still had enough money left to repay some of our debts.

I have to mention that Mike had a tremendous knowledge of his trade. After graduating from the Budapest gymnasium, his father, who was in the printing business, sent him to Leipzig. Leipzig was the center of the printing industry in Europe, and there Mike

learned everything about printing and printing machinery. He knew much more about it than the printers he worked for, and many times it caused friction.

After Leipzig, Mike went to Vienna, Austria, where he spent a year in the school of the arts of bookbinding. He did some fabulous work, real fancy bookbindings and some exquisite photo albums.

There was a very rich widow who traveled all over the world and, upon returning, came to Mike and asked him to make some fancy photo albums for her pictures. She once brought a tiger's skin from an African safari, and Mike made a cover of it for the album. At another time, I remember, she brought the most exquisite silk from China, and Mike used that for a cover too. There was always a big argument when it came to the bill. If I asked for one hundred dollars, according to the time spent and the materials, she insisted on always paying double what we asked for. Mike so much enjoyed doing artistic work that he didn't take on any other jobs during the times he worked on his favorite projects. Well the business really grew by leaps and bounds. We had to look for a larger place.

It was very hard to find anything suitable and reasonable to rent. One day somebody called our

attention to an old building that had been empty for a long time. We went to see it. There was hardly any roof left on it. Inside were pigeons and other animal life. And practically all the windows were broken. It was a huge brick building, two floors. Possibilities for rentals? Mike saw the potential of it, not me. He called up Mr. Liebling, who was a contractor. We met him once someplace. He came and looked over the building. He pointed out that the bricks had to be tuckpointed and other repairs were needed to make it usable. The cost for the repairs would be \$25,000. The purchase price was reasonable enough because it had been empty for a long time. It belonged to a family, and they had to pay tax on it. They were anxious to get rid of it. But we would still have to take out a loan to buy the building. The loan and the repair costs would have just been too much for us to handle.

After a day or two, Mr. Liebling called. He was a rich man and a good man. He said that the \$25,000 was minimum he could charge for the repairs, and that he wouldn't make any money on it. He told us how he appreciated how we had built up our business in such a short time, and he wanted us to be able to move our business there. His idea was that we didn't have to pay down anything. We had to promise that every month

we would send him one hundred dollars or more if we could afford it. The deal was done. We didn't even have to sign a paper.

Of course, we paid him off in a few years. He was a wonderful man to trust us like that. To me, it was like another miracle. Now we could acquire some machinery like punch presses and equipment for plastic binding. In a few years, we were almost out of the red.



Andy and Judy



Stuart, Lori and Rachel

Fulfillment at Last

I became pregnant. We bought a lot in a nice new subdivision, close to a brand-new elementary school, and had a home built. Andy was born in 1953; I named him after my brother Andor. His arrival meant the fulfillment of my life, the reason I survived Auschwitz, Hess. Lichtenau, the walks, and my return to Kaposvar. Whatever I became as a person was not only shaped by my genes but also by the effect of all my experiences, my heartaches, and the will to rationalize why I survived.

I have you, Andy, a loving, devoted son; your wife, Judy, a most thoughtful daughter to me; and my three beautiful and talented grandchildren--Stuart, Lori, and Rachel, the pleasure of my life. You all make me so proud and happy. "My cup runneth over" when I think of my family. My love is limitless for all of you. You are always in my prayers for your well-being. I pray that you will all achieve in life whatever you hope for and that you will go "from strength to strength" and will be blessed.

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